

It Will Be Okay. by Genevie

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Summary:

She hears about the slugs from Jonathan, who was told by Nancy, who found out from Mike, who had caught Will vomiting one up in the school bathroom and who had, subsequently, squashed it into a long, greasy smear on the floor with the toes of his sneakers.

Which makes Joyce the fourth person to learn that her son still carries pieces of the upside-down deep inside of him.

It Will Be Okay.

At first, Joyce spends her nights perched on the precipice of sleep, listening through the silence for any signs of distress rising through her house. This she does for weeks, and each night she hears nothing besides the shuffling of blankets, the groaning of mattresses, the pattering of bare feet on their way to the bathroom or to the kitchen. In the mornings, her sons don't emerge from their rooms wide-eyed and slightly off-key. They, in fact, seem remarkably like the boys they were before the cotton-stuffed body and the demogorgon; before the world and everything they thought they knew about it was turned upside-down.

It's hard for her to reconcile their calmness with the preceding chaos, but she supposes that they've never existed on her emotional plane to begin with. Will can fuse with the shadows and Jonathan knows how to make himself barely visible even in the light, but Joyce thrives on human contact. There are times when her words are like air to her, a necessary sustenance. She struggles to understand why her boys never talk to her; why, when she asks them how they're doing, they're always fine.

One night, she's in the kitchen contemplating a 3AM cup of coffee when Will wanders in for a drink of water.

"You know, you don't need to worry so much," he says as the tap is running. There's a pallor to his skin and a croaky quality to his voice. He's been coughing for a few days now, but it's cold season and the doctors had told her it would be hitting him harder this year. Something about the toxins he absorbed causing permanent damage to his immune system. She lets it be.

"Because you're fine?" she says, willing herself to smile. "I know. But I'm gonna do it anyway because I'm your mom and that's what moms do. We worry."

"Are you gonna be around for breakfast?"

"Probably not."

Will downs the water in a few gulps, then puts the glass in the sink. "Then, have a good day at work."

"Aww, thank you sweetheart. Sleep well, okay?"

It is not the first time they have this kind of conversation; it won't be the last, either. This is how they live now, her and Jonathan and Will. They skirt around the many ways through which they worry each other, acting as though their wounds are superficial; as if time will heal them. And she thinks, sometimes, that maybe the boys are right. Maybe this is fine. As long as they don't wake up in the middle of the night, screaming; as long as they're falling asleep on time; as long as they can get out of bed in the morning, then maybe things are working themselves out.

♦♦♦

Joyce isn't any more open with her boys than they are with her. She doesn't tell them that she still sees the demogorgon's hands pressing through her walls, or that she can still hear, at odd hours, the static flicker of the lights even when they're enduringly lit. The damp scent of the morning after a rainstorm, once one of her favourite smells, now makes her feel chilled and queasy. Some nights she wakes up drenched in sweat and panting for breath, the taste of toxic air flashing its memory across the back of her throat.

And in her worst moments the upside-down manifests all around her. Mucous climbs her walls like ivy. Tiny white motes hang in the air in chaotic constellations. Everything is darker and more musty than it should be, and she experiences the distinct feeling of being elsewhere.

She wants to tell them—wants to let them know that if they're experiencing similar things, then they aren't alone—but she worries that they'll just close themselves off even more out of the misplaced fear that their pain will only worsen hers. So she becomes guilty, in her own way, of perpetuating the affected normalcy of the Byers house; she, too, is fine.

What she does do is tell Hopper, who is good at listening and whose burdens are enough like her own that she knows he won't treat her

differently because he doesn't want to be treated any differently, either. They only share words at first, and glances—knowing and kind and inciting in ways which neither of them are ready to deal with, but which neither of them resists, either, when their words become touches and their warmth becomes heat.

“They're teenage boys,” he says one day. “Or close enough. What is Will, still twelve? They're just proud.”

But she knows this. It's the core of her problem: Pride, after all, goeth before a fall.

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She hears about the slugs from Jonathan, who was told by Nancy, who found out from Mike, who had caught Will vomiting one up in the school bathroom and who had, subsequently, squashed it into a long, greasy smear on the floor with the toes of his sneakers.

Which makes Joyce the fourth person to learn that her son still carries pieces of the upside-down deep inside of him. For a long while, she can't sort through her thoughts. This isn't a case of Will having nightmares, or of him feeling the phantom of the demogorgon's fingers closing in around his wrist. It is a matter of his physical well-being. Of his safety. And still, he kept it to himself. And still, he shut her out.

When she does, finally, confront him with the truth, he doesn't say much. Just apologises in such a genuine and pained way that she can't find it in herself to remain angry or disappointed, or to feel anything besides relieved that at least she found out before it's too late. He curls up in her arms and she holds him tight, hoping that he can't sense the way that her breaths keep hitching in her lungs.

“Don't worry, baby,” she says, softly. “It'll be okay. We'll figure this out.”

♦♦♦

In one small, isolated moment, Joyce cannot stand Hopper in vicious ways. She yells at him until her voice cracks, and then she smacks

her palms against his shoulders and she shoves him, hard, again and again, pushing him back until he grabs her wrists and holds her in place.

“Joyce,” he says, his voice steady, controlled. “I know you don’t like it, but I’m telling you, this is our only option.”

“Like hell it is, Hopper. You’re not taking my boy back to those... those people. You’re not.”

“They aren’t the same people.”

“Don’t you dare try to tell me that they’re any different. Don’t you dare. They worked with Brenner. Just because they left—“

“Yeah, they left. When they realised what he was doing, Joyce. They left because they didn’t want to support his work. And now they’re working their asses off trying to reverse the damage he’s caused. Does that really make them sound like the same people to you?”

She doesn’t care what Hopper says. She doesn’t trust them. Part of her is starting to trust him less, too, for even raising the idea. It bothers her that she doesn’t know how he found these people. She doesn’t understand why nobody approached her. Will is her boy. Hers. The topic of his health should never have been broached without her present and participating, an equal part of the process. “No,” she says, still livid. “Not without me.”

“It’s too dangerous.”

“I can handle myself, Hopper.”

“I know you can, and I don’t mean that it’s dangerous for you. It’s dangerous for them. Do you know how much is at risk here? Do you have any idea what they’re putting on the line just to help us.”

“Oh, so it’s okay that they can’t trust me, but I should trust them? With my son?”

“That’s not what I’m saying. I’m asking you to trust *me*, Joyce. I wouldn’t have suggested this if I wasn’t sure that they could help.”

“I can't,” she says. “I won't.”

“Even if it's the only chance Will has?”

“Don't say that.”

“It's something you need to consider.”

“Do you really think that I don't consider losing him every day? Every single day? Do you think I want to turn down anything that might help? I know what you're trying to do for my boy, Hopper, and I appreciate it, I do, but I won't—I *won't*—agree to anything that makes me feel this... this much more scared for Will. So just drop it, please. Leave it alone.”

“All right,” he says. “It's off the table. I'll put my feelers out for something else.”

♦ ♦ ♦

It's four in the morning, and Joyce is fortunate to be awake.

She finds Will on his hands and knees on the floor of the bathroom, gasping for air, punching himself in the diaphragm. His face is tinged blue and his eyes are red and wet and bulging. Brown-streaked mucous is spread across his lips. It drips down his chin and onto his pyjamas, onto the floor.

There is a slug in his throat; this, she concludes without thinking. And what she does, also without thinking, is pull him to his feet so she can wrap his arms around him in perfect position to give him the heimlich maneuver, but the slug is too thick, too long. No matter how hard she thrusts, it doesn't budge.

It is at this point when Jonathan rushes into the room, asking what's happening. The layer of panic in his voice is thick and high and it works its way into Joyce's nerves like an alarm. She refuses to let it travel any deeper than their surface. Sitting on the lip of the tub, she leans Will against her chest, tilting his head backwards. “Hold his mouth open,” she says.

“What?”

“Just do it, Jonathan.”

For the second goddamned time in his life, Will can't breathe. Nothing else matters. Not logic, not having a plan, not playing things safe. She puts her hand in his mouth and she navigates her fingers into his throat, past the tip of the slug. Its skin is slippery and thick and its body is unexpectedly hard, but she manages to dig her fingers into it enough to establish a tenuous grip. With all of her strength and all of her panic and a small part of her caution, she pulls at it, and she drags at it, and she yanks at it, and when finally enough of it has been extracted, she grabs it with both of her hands and she gets it the hell out of Will's throat, tossing it to Jonathan who catches it easily—who kills it in the sink with even greater ease.

Will takes a gasping breath, and then he takes another, and Joyce falls backwards with him into the tub, listening as his breaths become more steady. Soon, Jonathan joins them and they sit together like this, still and silent and tired in ways they haven't shown to each other before, until their muscles are cramped and their bodies are aching and they are each brave enough to leave the familiarity of the other's arms and face what is happening to them.

When they're in the kitchen, deciding on what to have for breakfast, Joyce looks at both of her boys and she tells them about seeing the demogorgon and about how sometimes, when she opens her eyes she thinks she's back in the upside-down. They, in turn, talk about the ways through which that one week in October is leaving its marks on them, and she tells them, with warm confidence, that everything will be okay.

♦♦♦

She and Hopper are sitting side-by-side on her porch, cigarettes dangling from between their fingers, clouds of smoke swirling like ghosts in the air. Silence stretches the distance between them so that even though their knees are touching, Joyce feels like she's miles away.

She reaches for her third cigarette and Hopper asks, before she takes it from the pack, “So, are you going to let me know why you called me over here at seven-o'clock in the morning?” His voice is soft, its

timbre confused. When she still can't give him an answer he adds, "Joyce, you need to tell me what's going on."

And she knows that. The words are just so damned hard to find. "Promise me that you'll keep Will safe," she says, eventually. "When you take him to those people. Please promise me."

"Why are you asking me this now? Did something happen?"

Joyce nods. Keeps nodding until her words dislodge themselves from her throat. "I almost lost him again," she says, her voice so small that she isn't sure it exists. "This morning. He was in the bathroom, and..."

But Hopper does hear her. "Jesus. Was it one of the slugs?"

"Stuck in his throat. I had to pull it out. With my hands." She holds them up in front of her and they tremble like the hanging branches of a willow tree, caught in the wind. It bothers her how delicate they look and so she grasps onto Hopper's free hand, holding it tight in her lap as if to say, *it's okay, I'm staying strong.*

"I promise," he says. "Nothing will happen to him. Not on my watch."

♦♦♦

Joyce isn't thinking about where, exactly, Will is going and what will happen to him once he's there. She isn't worrying about whether or not Hopper can keep her baby boy safe all by himself. Jonathan's hands are gripped so hard on her shoulder that his fingers dig painfully into the soft valley above her collarbone but she's not thinking about that, either, or about the way her own fingers ache from how tightly she's clenching them into fists.

These things will occur to her later, all at once, like the pins and needles feeling of a leg that's fallen asleep. In this moment, though, she watches Hopper's car disappear around the bend and she thinks, *It will be okay. It will all be okay.*

And in the end, it is okay.

Works inspired by this one:

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